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ABSTRACT

Teaching undergraduate students to write required essays for academic courses is the focus of this paper. In a preparatory lecture the instructor explains essay standards and provides instructions for writing essays. An model essay is presented to each class member to be used as a guide for class compositions. The appendix includes an essay of approximately 1,500 words that presents an opening paragraph followed by 16 example paragraphs explaining the heading of each in detail. Examples are: title, subheadings, paragraphs, initial paragraphs, middle paragraphs, final paragraphs, bibliographic information, and a bibliography. (NL)

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USING A MODEL ESSAY AS A TEACHING TOOL IN UNDERGRADUATE GEOGRAPHY COURSES

A Paper Presented at the Annual
Meeting of the National Council
for Geographic Education

Hershey, Pennsylvania

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USING A MODEL ESSAY AS A TEACHING TOOL

IN UNDERGRADUATE GEOGRAPHY COURSES

My students do a lot of writing. All of them keep logbooks accounting for up to 40 percent of their course grades. In all my upper division courses I require at least one significant essay, and in my two senior courses (Field Geography and Seminar in Geography) I give no examinations but base grades almost entirely on written work. Last fall in a similar session at NCGE88 I spoke about the logbook (journal) as a teaching tool. This fall I am going to share with you a model essay that I composed to help students improve their essay results. A bit later I will distribute copies of my composition. First, however, I want to discuss my rationale for writing it, how I have tried using it, changes that the intervening months have brought to it, and student comments about it.

For years I have taken class time before the first essay to advise students about my writing philosophy, to outline my essay standards, and to make suggestions about where in the literature and on our campus they could go to seek writing guidance. Often this preparatory lecture would stretch beyond a single class period and require additional time on a later day. I tried to condense years of composition instruction into a hard-hitting, comprehensive package suitable for undergraduate students. I strove to translate Turabian's subheading hierarchy through spoken words and chalkboard examples (Turabian 1987, 10-11). My list of suggested reference items included Turabian, of course, but also Strunk

and White (Strunk and White 1979), Hart's "Ruminations" (Hart 1976), the thesaurus, and a handful of other prizes from my shelf. Relief sites on our campus, besides my office, included the Writing Center and the Grammar Hotline.

I assumed they were taking down all that I so carefully included in my monologue about writing, but often the outcome of their first essays argued otherwise. Three weeks into my Seminar in Geography back in the spring of 1988 I decided the time had come to codify my admonitions in the form of commands--as William Strunk, Jr., had done, circa 1919, at Cornell University (Strunk and White 1979, xi). Why I decided to weave these commands into a model essay escapes me now, but at least one of my students thinks it was a brilliant decision.

My model essay is now in its fourth semester of use. Students receive it and a brief overview when I assign their first essay. From time to time after that I break it out as I return subsequent essays to them. Sometimes I will refer an individual to a particular page, paragraph, or line as I grade his or her paper. Several of them faithfully bring the model essays to class just as they do their textbooks. They seem somehow comforted having my essay handy.

The first edition of the model essay ran about seven hundred words and survived for two semesters. From students who used it, I gathered, through directed logbook entries and other means, enough compliments and suggestions to justify a major overhaul in January 1989. The two most recent editions, including the fourth (which you will receive), have featured only my compulsive fine tuning.

Edition four contains about fifteen hundred words--roughly twice the number of the first. Most of the increment came in three sections. I added a long paragraph on subheadings and illustrated the techniques in the model essay. Second, I added a section on silly errors that students were making when I started teaching in 1970 and are still making today. Finally, at the request of many in their logbooks, I increased the number of examples.

Over the four semesters, fifty-seven students, mainly senior Geography majors, have had access to the model essay. On the whole their reactions have been favorable, and I believe their written work has profited.

Many complain in their logbooks, some at considerable length, about how different instructors want essays done differently. Students appreciate the model essay for setting them straight at the outset as to how Professor Sublett wants papers done in his classes. Several of those who grouse about variations in professorial preferences across campus suggest that I confer with colleagues and help devise one set of standards for the whole campus.

Quite a few students comment on the section of the model essay that deals with the distinction between the active voice and the passive voice. They want and need more emphasis than I prefer to provide in this vehicle. Clearly I must devote other handouts and activities to convincing them of the desirability of the active voice, showing them how to recognize the passive, and making them proficient at activating their prose.

To conclude this section of my paper, permit me to read part of a logbook entry from one of the more enthusiastic of the fifty-seven.

> Excellent! This is honestly and exactly what I thought when you first handed this out to us. . . . I read it with admiration. How nifty for someone to combine all the needed information of writing up essays in an essay within itself; genius! I have used this piece of paper every time I set out to write up and type up my papers. It's so compact and full of the detail I need that it will carry over very nicely into all my other writings. . . . I think you should distribute this essay across campus and certainly continue in class. Before this I never gave thought about my active or passive voice, but now I check myself every time.

Please examine the model essay (Appendix). Except for the paragraph numbers in the left margin and the note at the end, the essay appears as it most likely will next semester. Students are to mimic the appearance of this essay when they prepare theirs for my consideration. Observe the essay's (1) lack of binder and cover sheet, (2) staple inclined to facilitate turning of pages, (3) name and date section, (4) centered, upper-case title, (5) uniformly indented paragraphs, (6) double-spaced, one-side-only text, (7) one-inch margins (except above the title), and (8) subheadings (optional). "The use of language," wrote E. B. White, thirty years ago in the chapter he added to Strunk's little booklet, "begins with imitation" (Strunk and White 1979, 70). I

hope my students agree. Now let us leaf through the model essay as I comment briefly on of its paragraphs.

Paragraph 1: I constantly encounter pertinent job notices that specify good writing skills. Every chance I get (first sentence) I call the necessity of quality writing to the attention of my students. I also try in the first paragraph to place myself, as a writer, on the same plane as my undergraduates--one who also benefits from well-wrought, well-meant criticism. My thesis statement for the model essay concludes the initial paragraph.

Paragraph 2: How relatively bright college students can write an essay and omit the title has amazed me for years, nay, decades. Any title beats none at all; but in the second paragraph, I encourage them to choose a title that will both intrigue and inform. I did not, by the way, actually consider the working and revised titles you see on the first page of the essay.

Paragraph 3: The lengthy paragraph on subheadings added a couple hundred words to the model essay, but the results have pleased me. I wanted to (1) subdivide my essay as a locator aid for users and (2) succinctly summarize the material on subheadings that I had struggled to dispense orally. If a student really wishes to use subheadings correctly, careful reading of Paragraph 3 will pay off.

Paragraph 4: Stretching from Paragraph 4 through Paragraph 13, the section on paragraphs occupies slightly more than half of the model essay. Five sentences per paragraph seems to be a good target for

the developing writer. Paragraphs of one sentence usually mean beginner's insecurity.

Paragraph 5: I doubt that many of my students have tried scanning for topic sentences (as I suggest here). The practice does prove useful to me every now and then.

Paragraph 6: More than half the fourteen students in this fall's Field Geography class produce the final version of their papers on typewriters, despite the fact that most have had either freshman composition or technical writing (or both) taught solely on a word processor. I still occasionally use the one-paragraph-per-page technique, and several students have commented favorably in their logbooks after trying it.

Paragraph 7: I hate writing introductions. Citing an incident from personal experience often helps me get going, and I have noticed students taking a cue from my advice on the issue. Note also my use of "him or her" in the fourth line of Paragraph 7. Not only do I want users of the model essay to do as I say or suggest, but I also want them to see how I write. I expect thesis statements to be blatantly clear. Later in their lives students can employ more subtle harbingers.

Paragraph 8: Paragraph 8 reminds students about the importance of their essay's body. I use the paragraph's last sentence to prepare students for the next four paragraphs.

Paragraph 9: A couple years ago I had a student in my Seminar in Geography class begin something like fifteen consecutive essay

sentences with the word I. Word variety (especially the lack of it) really draws my attention.

Paragraph 10: I can compose convoluted sentences with the best of them, but I advocate terseness on occasion. The last sentence in the model essay has only two words, and several have less than five. I hope students learn by imitation.

Paragraph 11: I reread Hart's "Ruminations" recently, for the first time in several years, and found us in agreement on virtually every matter--except periodic sentences. He wrote, "The most important idea in a sentence should be its subject." Of course, but then he went on, "The subject should be placed near the beginning of the sentence, not buried at the end. . . . Do not begin a sentence with a dependent clause" (Hart 1976, 229). Subject-verb sentences, without a break, leave me begging for variety--such as that which I suggest as the better of the two choices on the fourth page.

Paragraph 12: Fortunately, for Hart, we do agree on the preferability of active over passive voice. I guess you could call me a zealot on the subject of passive voice since I saw the light a couple years ago while teaching a writing block for the Army. My college students try so hard to write in the active voice, but years of seeing the passive in print and hearing people to whom they look up using the passive so frequently makes their conversion tough. I have gone so far as to rewrite the first stanzas of The Star-Spangled Banner and Battle Hymn of the Republic in the passive voice to demonstrate how awful the passive really sounds. I intend to keep trying.

Paragraph 13: By the time I arrive at the conclusions, I usually just want to escape. Paragraph 13 lets the students know I share their discomfort but still want them to "exit gracefully."

Paragraph 14: The list of silly errors should bring back memories to you of papers graded or manuscripts edited. I once became so uncertain of my ability to spell that I checked a dictionary to see whose version of a lot was correct. I find myself still in league with the lexicographers on this one, but my guess is the living language will eventually accept alot. By the way, Libbee and Young (or their Journal of Geography editor) misused affect in a subheading on page 24 of their article, "Teaching Writing in Geography Classes" (Libbee and Young 1983, 24). Silliness happens.

Paragraph 15: I have no doubt that the composition literature overflows with suggestions on how to get students to revise and polish. I stress the pride factor and try to live up to that standard.

Paragraph 16: Whether they benefit from anything else in the model essay, students will put this paragraph to good use. My specifications may seem to some purely personal preferences; but when our students leave college, they will have to adhere to agency or company guidelines when they write reports and the like.

Paragraph 17: Though I love the results, writing for me and most of us requires hard work. Students need to know we professors suffer, too. At least, I do.

I encourage you to consider a model essay for your own fledgling writers. Please make use of any aspects of this essay that seem appropriate for your situation. Good luck.

APPENDIX

Michael D. Sublett
12 October 1989

AN ESSAY ON SHORT ESSAYS

Because many careers require considerable facility in written communication, students should write frequently and receive prompt, constructive criticism of their efforts. All of us can benefit from a close examination of our written work by someone able to suggest improvements in format, content,
1. style, grammar, and punctuation. I will ask you to write several short essays in this course. Do your utmost on every essay, so I will know where you are in your pursuit of excellence. In this model essay I provide suggestions to help you improve your writing.

Title

All essays require a title. Choose the title carefully. Make it appealing and informative. You might start with a working title and later revise to reflect what you eventually wrote:
2.

Working title: Sublett's Suggestions to Student Scribes.

Revised title: Several Suggestions for Better Essays.

Final title: An Essay on Short Essays.

Subheadings

Although uncommon and often unnecessary in short essays, subheadings appear here as an instructional tool. Subheadings help the reader immensely as essay length and complexity increase. If you do employ subheadings, keep the
3. following rules in mind. First, leave two blank lines (triple-space) between the last line of the previous section and the subheading; leave one blank line (double-space) below the subheading. Second, center the subheading be-

tween the margins (high priority) or begin the first word flush with the left margin (lower priority). Third, increase the priority of a subheading by italicizing it. In priority order, therefore, from highest to lowest, you may choose subheadings that you (1) center and italicize, (2) center but do not italicize (I use here), (3) set flush with the left margin and italicize (I
3. use here), and (4) set flush with the left margin but do not italicize. Fourth, whenever you use a subheading at a particular priority level, you must employ at least one other subheading at that level in that portion of the essay. Finally, capitalize the first and last words plus all other words except a, an, but, for, nor, or, the, to (when an infinitive, as in Learning to Write), and prepositions.

Paragraphs

Even if subheadings seem inappropriate for your paper, by all means use paragraphs to assist the reader. Focus on a goal of, say, five related sentences per paragraph; and then vary the number depending on the topic. Para-
4. graphs should in almost all cases (99 percent) contain more than one sentence. If you discover a paragraph of only one sentence, add sentences to that paragraph, combine the lonesome sentence with another paragraph, drop the sentence, or leave it and prepare to defend your decision.

For all paragraphs, no matter what the length, your reader should be able to identify the key (topic) sentence. In fact, write so that the reader who scans the essay for topic sentences can from them learn the essay's gist.
5. Try scanning the essay you are now reading for topic sentences. In this paragraph the topic sentence comes first (as is often the case).

Years ago, one of my teachers taught me a trick about paragraphs: place
6. only one paragraph on each page in early drafts. Moving paragraphs around then becomes as simple as shuffling pages. Employing the clean back sides of

6. previously used paper makes the one-paragraph idea less of a paper waster.

First Paragraphs

Use your initial paragraph(s) as an introduction to the subject of the essay. Some writers like to cite an incident from their personal experience.
7. No matter how you structure the introduction, however, use it to interest your reader and to prepare him or her for what follows. The end of the first paragraph is a good place for the thesis statement of your essay.

Middle Paragraphs

Paragraphs found between the first and last constitute the body of a short essay. Use the body to make your argument about whatever it is you are
8. writing. Keep your reader interested (here and throughout your essay) by varying the wording, length, and structure of your sentences.

Choose words carefully. While it is fine to begin some sentences with the, a series of five in a row tends to annoy the observant reader. Habitually notice first words (I is another word to watch) when you proof. If
9. you encounter repetition (first-word or otherwise), seek an alternative word. Consult a dictionary if you are not absolutely certain the new word says what you want. Sometimes recasting the offending sentence is easier than finding the right synonym.

Use neither all short nor all long and complicated sentences. Instead, employ both. Avoid grammatical sentence fragments lest your reader suspect you of being a poor writer. Know, however, that an emphatic fragment, like
10. "Nuts!" (attributed to an American general, Anthony McAuliffe, at Bastogne in World War II), spices your prose and in no way calls into question your writing ability.

11. Experiment with the relative placement of sentence parts. Instead of

beginning all your sentences with the subject and following with the predicate, which quickly becomes boring, use a periodic structure (as I have done
11. in this sentence). With the periodic sentence, items of a lesser nature precede the heart of the sentence:

Boring: The map lacks a legend because the designer forgot.

Better: Because the designer forgot, the map lacks a legend.

Choose the (forceful) active voice over the (feeble) passive. Instead of having your subject acted upon, make your subject the actor. Doing so you save words and keep your reader informed about who did what to whom. Examples follow:

Passive: Bradley <u>will be beaten</u> badly by us in basketball.

Active: We <u>will beat</u> Bradley badly in basketball.

12.

Passive: I <u>am being asked</u> by my instructor to write better.

Active: My instructor <u>is asking</u> me to write better.

Passive: Once assignments <u>were distributed</u> by John, we left.

Active: Once John <u>distributed</u> assignments, we left.

Passive: It <u>is believed</u> you should write in the active voice.

Active: I <u>believe</u> you should write in the active voice.

<u>Last Paragraph</u>

Use the final paragraph(s) to collect your thoughts and exit gracefully from the essay. Do not merely end the paper with the last of your points about the topic. On the other hand, seldom is it necessary in a short essay
13. to list again all your main points. Conclusions (and introductions) tax most of us more than does the body. Some writers prefer to do the body first, then the conclusion, then the introduction, and finally the title. Choose the system that works best for you.

Silly Errors to Avoid

Silly errors leave your reader wondering whether you knew not the correct way or overlooked the errors in your haste to finish. Neither conclusion flatters you. Here is a list of common mistakes students make in papers they submit to me--avoid these errors and save yourself grief (and lost points):

(1) Using contractions in formal prose: don't, wasn't, it's.

(2) Choosing the wrong word: principal confused with principle, its confused with it is or it's, affect with effect, their with there, to with too, complimentary with complementary.

(3) Making up a word: alot instead of a lot.

14.

(4) Employing words (this, it, these, those) whose antecedents are unclear: This is confusing.

(5) Failing to follow years or states (countries) with commas: January 5, 1993, is the day; Normal, Illinois, is the place.

(6) Failing to space properly around the dash and the hyphen: dash--dash, hyphen-hyphen.

Almost Done

Do not allow a single draft to satisfy you; use subsequent drafts to improve your composition. Check your spelling after the first draft, and edit later drafts for typographical errors and superfluous words. Ask someone you

15.

trust (who knows about writing) to examine your work. Polish your final product as others polish their classic auto or fine china. Be proud to turn in the results of your efforts.

Now make final preparations for submission. Center the title above the text and two inches from the top of the sheet. Use nothing but capital let-

16.

ters. Underline only those parts of your title that ordinarily require italics such as the name of a book, newspaper, magazine, or journal. For the

typewriter and most word processors, underlining is the equivalent of italics. Begin the first paragraph on the third line below the title. Indent the first line of all paragraphs five to seven spaces to indicate the start of a paragraph. Double-space all text, including block quotations and footnotes. Employ margins of one inch on the sides and bottom of all pages and on the top
16. after the first page. If the essay requires more than one page, use additional sheets of paper--rather than the back sides. Number the sheets (after the first) in some convenient spot, such as top center. For short essays, use no cover sheet or fancy binder. Secure multiple sheets, in the proper order, with a staple (slanted like a virgule [/]) in the top left-hand corner. Place your name and the date in the top right-hand corner of the first page.

Exit

Writing (especially good writing) requires hard work. Strive for im-
17. provement and profit from constructive criticism. I do.

Note: This version of "An Essay on Short Essays" differs from the one I hand to students only in the presence of this note and the paragraph numbers.

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